



Book Review

Kant's Humorous Writings: An Illustrated Guide (2021) by Robert R. Clewis

Shouvik Narayan Hore

Publisher: Bloomsbury Academic, London (2021), xxiii+252pp

Language: English

ISBN- (print edition): 978-1-3501-1278-0

Prefaced by Noel Carroll whose book on Humour comes across as a useful introduction to readers, this book is divided into two parts – the first being an explication of Kant's associations, formulations and theorizations of jokes (including its sophistications, such as humour, laughter, smiles and so forth), while the second deals with Kantian humour as it appeared in several of his publications, the ones predominant being *Observations on the Feelings of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764), *Critique of Judgment* (1790) and *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1798). In 'The Secret Soul of Kant's Joke', Clewis begins by segregating the ethical and philosophical limits of three best-informed theories on Humour – the Superiority Theory (humour emanating from human hierarchies with regards to morality, class structures and mannerisms), realized in the works of Plato, Aristotle, Rene Descartes, Thomas Hobbes and Henri Bergson;¹ Incongruity Theory (characterized by the nothingness that succeeds an act of fulsome expectations), in which participants other than Kant himself include Frances Hutcheson, James Beattie, Arthur Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard) and Relief Theories (Understood through a release of psychic energy, as a safe expression of the repressed in our Unconscious), propounded by Herbert Spencer and expanded primarily by Freud and Mikhail Bakhtin.² Kant's Humour is incongruous as it participates in a heightening of expectations with the possibility for accomplishment on one hand and honour on the other. In lieu of it, those expectations are overturned and replaced with an anti-climax which, being painless and reconcilable with the seriousness of previous expectations, participates in the lack of congruity, and is released in the form of laughter or other forms of hilarity (15). Kant participates in relief and superiority theories too, as Clewis notes, in texts such as *Anthropology* and the *Critique of Judgment* where the *élan vital* is strengthened by a burst of laughter (hence physiological). An overlapping of all these makes Kant assume the "middle ground" (21), standardizing the prestige of Humour.³ Although Humour sources itself in a free play between the faculties of Imagination and understanding (sharing commonalities, in the process, with our conception of the Beautiful), it is triggered by what Clewis calls "a mistaken judgment" (23), which could mean two things – either the imaginative, by overleaping the bounds of imagination, lands in a category which is a no-go for understanding, or in a nihilistic understanding that represses imagination into devolving and appearing like an outrageous product of the imagination. The author notes Kant's neglect of both tragic and comic forms in his *Critique* while reserving some admiration for classical

playwrights such as Shakespeare. Arguing beauty and sublimity in 'Three Questions about Laughter at Humour', Clewis proffers that laughter might fulfil the conditions of both. Through Marmysz, Hounsokou, Nichols and Giamario, he arrives at the common etymology of the Sublime (*das erhebene*) and elevating (*erhebend*), concluding that for Freud, it becomes the ego's "victorious assumption of its own invulnerability" (55). For Humour to elevate humankind, it requires an indefensible moral superiority fed by ideas (comprehension) and the fear that humour might prompt psychic transformation of an apocalyptic kind and become its own categorical imperative.⁴ One can deduce vis-à-vis Kant that laughter and sublimity are reared in the discord between imagination and reason, can generate relief and freedom through physiological actions and aid in the evaporation of negative expectations into positive moments. Similar trends can be witnessed when beauty engages with humour under conditions of disinterestedness and universality (56-58). In the final chapter entitled 'Kant and the Ethics of Humour', Clewis highlights the ethical constraints on humour where, as per the principles, dignity must not come under the direct line of attack of an ill-aimed joke; neither should a joke savage an individual for lack of adequate dignity. To paraphrase Kant from the *Critique of Judgment*, cracking a joke which is adequately funny requires precise 'skill' (72). The discrimination of the humoured and the *humorer* (if I am permitted to use the word) often decides the fate of the joke. Through the application of several premises and counter-premises, Clewis brings the first part of his book to an end. It is succeeded by Part Two and Part Three which constitutes Kant's humour as it plays across classes, races and nations, often anecdotal but sometimes on the brink of sarcasm, mockery or mild insult. These include well-known ones, such as 'The Merchant's Wig', 'German Fools', 'Samuel Johnson's Wife', 'Abelard's Flying Fox' and 'The Voltaire Bros', alongside others with a favourable potential for Humour.

Clewis' book, replete with illustrations, explores an aspect of Kant that has been generously ignored by serious scholars of the age of Enlightenment. The lighter side of the most famous philosopher after Plato makes the book an anecdote for Kantians and non-Kantians alike, for its literary and poetic significance.

Endnotes

¹ In the third essay on *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, Bergson puts it forth in simple words, "In laughter, we always find an unavowed intention to humiliate, and consequently to correct our neighbor, if not in his will, at least in his deed." This is a distinct example of what is interpreted as the Superiority theory of Humour. See p. 136 of the book by the same title, originally translated by Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell for the MacMillan Company in 1912 and republished by Martino Publishing in 2014.

² The fundamental source of Freudian humour, the repressed Unconscious, in the words of Andrew Slade, "never tires of wishing and will find a way to make the wishes acceptable to the consciousness so that there is a silencing of the stimulus, a fulfilment of the wish that is acceptable to the censoring activity of the preconscious" (43). See *Psychoanalytic Theory and Criticism* (2016), Orient BlackSwan.

³ For similar conclusions, see Paul McDonald's *The Philosophy of Humour* (Humanities-Ebooks, 2012), pp. 51-53.

⁴ See *On Humour* (2004), Routledge, by Simon Critchley, especially the first paragraph on p. 86).

Bio-note

Shouvik N. Hore has published two books of poetry- *The Horizon of Thoughts* and *Poet's Choice* (Vol. 2). He has published poetry in National and International journals. His research papers and treatises have appeared in Appropriations, JCLA, The Spring Magazine and

English Forum Journal (To mention a few), and he has won a National Poetry competition organized by the Poona College of Arts, Science and Commerce. He has been awarded an MPhil from the University of Hyderabad, Telangana, and is currently pursuing PhD from Vidyasagar University, West Bengal.
Email:souvikhore94@gmail.com